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THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER

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THE PHYSICAL NEEDS OF THE GRAMMAR SCHOOL GIRL

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The motion of a heavenly body, say the astronomers, is the resultant of all the forces acting upon it. It may not be in the direction of any one of them. In a somewhat similar way the course that a teacher follows is the resultant of many forces; the direction in which she would travel is only one element in the way which she takes. More and more the grammar-school teacher is finding that the pressure, even from a point as far advanced as college, is transmitted beyond the high school and is making itself felt farther back in the grades. Every year more things must be done during the thirteen years—or twelve years of public school. Manifestly not all the additional work can be done in the last four grades.

The grammar-school teacher is influenced by what she learns of the situation of her pupils in their homes and in their community. It becomes evident that for a large number of these children there is now no schooling after the grammar grades. Whatever learning the greater part of these young people are to have the grammar school must give them. And this applies not to book-learning alone but also to instruction in cooking and sewing and similar subjects which children are apparently no longer taught at home.

It lies with especial weight upon a teacher's mind that the pupils before her are potently related to the state, and that one of

her first duties is to give them some instruction that shall furnish a basis of intelligence for the coming generation of common people with whom our political destiny must rest. Her standing with her superintendent may be largely influenced by the way in which she responds to some particular hobby of his; her general professional reputation depends to a great degree, she knows, upon the percentage with which her pupils pass their high-school examinations. With all these forces acting upon a teacher, what wonder that she sometimes finds she is moving in an orbit surprising even to herself? The importance of the physical preservation and upbuilding of her pupils is seldom indicated in the course of work laid out for a teacher, yet physical development is the most important element in the life of a child between the ages of eight and fourteen. Is not this what we should wish considered first in the case of our own children? Students of education and of health are saying now with impressive emphasis that the years between ten and fourteen are the critical period of a girl's whole life for the establishment of her physical well-being. Unquestionably this care of the health should be provided in the girl's own home, but it is evident that in the majority of instances the demand is not adequately met there. In such cases the girl's only hope for guidance is in her teacher. To meet this demand, however, a teacher needs to know just the existing conditions. Often this knowledge has been offered her neither in normal school nor in supplementary instruction at teachers' institutes nor by supervisors. She sees evidences of nervous strain in her girls and understands in a general way what it indicates. For definite information it is worth her while to read Professor John Tyler's *Growth and Education*. Here, in the chapter on the "Grammar School," she will learn that while the death rate is low at this time, morbidity is rising to its first maximum at about the age of thirteen. This is not a period when sickness and death are to be feared; it is rather a time of foundations, foundations either for health or for weakness:

At this critical period of puberty every organ in the body is more or less modified. A girl's future happiness, if not her life itself, depends upon the successful accomplishment of this metamorphosis. She is making her

final preparation for Nature's second and most searching examination. Almost anything except readiness for this test can be postponed or even neglected without irremediable loss. But failure to meet Nature's requirements here means ruin, and a low mark means lifelong disabilities, if not weariness and pain. The test will soon be applied once for all and must be final. There is no appeal from the verdict and no forgiveness for those who even ignorantly have sinned against Nature's laws.

In the same chapter Professor Tyler tells us that the years before ten furnish opportunity to store up vitality against the lean years of puberty. The increased morbidity of girls later is attributed to poverty of blood, due to accumulation of waste material, or deterioration through loss of appetite or decrease of assimilative and digestive powers. Now may be the time when fatal diseases gain entrance into the system. In the upper classes in England, as a case in point, the death rate from consumption in girls between fifteen and twenty is three times that of boys. But the seeds of inability to resist disease are sown in earlier years:

The time to begin to take precautions is at seven or eight. Few seem to think that the health of the girls in the grammar grades needs any care or attention. There could hardly be a worse or more dangerous mistake.

We gain from Professor Tyler a conviction that there is upon some one a great responsibility for these girls—a responsibility that they are in no way qualified to take upon themselves. And when a teacher realizes that for the girls in her room, their future health and so their ability to become successful students or wage earners or housewives may be determined in these months, we may be sure that she will inquire what she can do about it. And what *can* she do?

In the first place she must carefully consider existing conditions for each girl—her physical condition, the conditions surrounding her in her home, the effect of school and its demands upon her.

The chapter on "Periodicity" in President Hall's *Adolescence*, or the little volume, *Sex in Education*, by Doctor Clarke, which aroused so much discussion a score of years ago, explain fully the demands which nature is making for each girl at her time of puberty. At this period she is developing an extremely important element of her being, in the eyes of nature her most

important system, one to which all other systems should give way. To this development a girl's nourishment and blood and vitality should be directed for many months. If the nurture that belongs to these organs is diverted from them they are stunted permanently and the result is irregularity of function, life-long suffering, a woman "not very strong," and incapable of meeting the demands which life has a right to make of her. And her fate is often settled while she is in the grammar school—you have the word of educator and biologist and physician for it. No less an authority than Dr. Engelmann maintained that the appalling burden of ill health upon American women could be greatly lessened by preventive measures at the time of puberty.

This is the physical condition, the anatomical condition, we might almost say, of the school girl at the time of puberty. What are the conditions surrounding her in her home? She requires generous nourishment now and it is especially important that waste matter should be completely eliminated from both her digestive and her respiratory systems, that her blood may be kept clean. Proper exercise and unlimited fresh air are literally vital. Suitable clothing also is especially important, such clothing as does not impede growth and movement, and properly protects the body from cold. It is an important question whether her home is looking out for these things, and also keeping her from unsuitable and exhausting amusements.

School conditions for pupils are, we expect, under the control of the teachers—or the superintendent—and ought to be made as favorable as possible for the adolescent girl. But we hear of pupils hardly in their teens who cannot sleep for fear of pending examinations, who have somehow become morbidly nervous in relation to their school and its requirements. They are almost hysterical if there is danger of a mark for tardiness or absence, or a paper that is a day late. A great many teachers sacrifice their pupils and work much evil at this time through their desire to report a high percentage of attendance. It is very important that a girl should be interested and prompt, but these are not the most important matters just now.

If the conditions for the adolescent girl are as critical as we

have tried to show, again we must ask, what can the teacher do about it? As soon as she has determined what is to be done she will naturally inquire what she can get the mother to do. The acquaintance between mothers and teachers varies much in different places, depending chiefly upon the individual teacher and upon the superintendent. In relation to the maturing girl there is the greatest need for confidence between the mother and the teacher. The mother should be shown what needs to be done and the tremendous importance of her doing it.

The very least that the mother can grant is an expression of her willingness that the teacher attempt to give the girl the direction that she ought to receive at home. I believe that the average mother would be glad to have these matters put rightly before her daughter; often a mother says, "I know I ought to tell my daughter about these things, but I keep putting it off because I do not know just what to say."

It will be the teacher's business, a somewhat difficult business, perhaps, to know what to say. Probably before the end of her grammar-school years the young woman has come under the periodic law, and periodic rest is requisite to her development. This means no less than that just as soon as a girl is governed by a wave of increasing and diminishing vitality, as she is for more than thirty years of her life, this rhythm must be respected. For at least two years she must give up two days in every month to complete rest, mental and physical. She ought to stay out of school for those two days, though sometimes a girl very strong in body and nerves goes with no immediate signs of harm. But she must be kept free from any exertion that will divert nutrition from developing organs. Staying out of school of course causes some interruption to her work, but her teacher knows that she can keep her standing nevertheless if she tries. Many a high-school girl is obliged to be absent two days every month during the latter part of her college preparation or, at least, is unable to do any effective work because of pain, and yet keeps front rank in her class. Even if her absences did affect the standing of the grammar-school girl they would be worth while because they are necessary

to the establishment for her of a vigor which many American women have missed. We all know women who are invalids because, their physicians tell them, they "are no more developed than are twelve-year old girls."

In many cases a girl would be better off if she could be taken from school entirely and given a year for physical development under right conditions. Frequently, however, it is quite as well for her to be in the regularity of school life under a judicious and watchful teacher because the care at home is not judicious.

The home conditions of a girl's life at this time it seems almost impossible for a teacher to affect, yet she can do much toward bringing the girl herself to know what is good for her in food and clothing and amusements. Physiology is one of the subjects that has been forced back from the high school to the grammar grades; and a teacher who has definitely in mind what her girls ought to know will find in her textbook many texts for teaching the facts of hygiene vital now when "every organ of the body is affected by the change." In mixed schools one lesson for the girls alone, easily arranged while the boys are occupied at an athletic meeting, for example, can give emphasis to the other instruction; in the case of the older girls they can be given an idea, so far as girls of that age can comprehend it, of the importance of the physical change that has come to them.

In relation to school work the teacher must consider in general what seems proved, that nervous and mental exertion at this time robs the developing organs of the blood and vitality needed for their perfecting even more than would great physical demands upon the undeveloped limbs of the child and for exactly the same reason.

We need [says Professor Tyler] teachers with clear and watchful eyes who can lighten worry, fret, and weariness, and can see when leniency is needed and when firmness is kindness, who know when not to notice a bad error or recitation or even a day's work; who can pass over or advise a day's absence from school now and then.

Though there are so many demands upon the mind and the minutes of every teacher, yet we have faith in her and reason for the faith that she will find time and strength to do at any rate the duty that is most worth while.